Crime and Punishment:
An American Odyssey

By Everett C. Ladd

The rates of most types of crime were essentially constant from the mid-1930s, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, through the late 1950s and early 1960s. Then, they soared. For example, the number of robberies per one thousand population tripled between 1963 and 1973. The rate of felonious assaults more than doubled in this ten-year span. The "Sixties" were perhaps the most tumultuous decade in American history in the reach of social change—and the country's experience with crime was certainly no exception.

It's hardly surprising, then, that the public's thinking about crime has been transformed over the past twenty-five years. For the first time in US history, the

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incidence of crime has come to be seen as a major *national* issue. From the onset of opinion surveys in the 1930s, on through the mid-1960s, pollsters, ever sensitive to currents in public sentiment, almost never asked questions about crime. Tragic events like the Lindbergh baby kidnapping prompted a few inquiries, but crime wasn't on the charts as a general issue of social concern. As crime rates climbed sharply in the Sixties, however, so did the public's worries—and in consequence the volume of polling on the subject. "Do something!" became a predominant, and much examined, response. Americans became markedly less sympathetic to calls for rehabilitation, more inclined to emphasize the need for firm punishment.

Support for the death penalty for capital crimes, which had fallen sharply in the 1950s and early 1960s, began climbing thereafter. It reached by the mid-1990s the highest levels ever in the span opinion polls have been conducted. The public's response on the death penalty issue is largely symbolic. It reflects a vast shift in underlying sentiment about crime and punishment. Many Americans concluded that their society had deferred too much to the accused and convicted, and had failed to establish firm punishment. African Americans have remained significantly less

inclined than others to endorse the death penalty, but most group differences on the issue have shrunk markedly as "get tougher" became the nation's norm.

It's not surprising that the criminal justice system has been getting mixed assessments. On the one hand, the public backs the work of its law enforcement agencies. It is broadly sympathetic to police efforts and wants to support the police both financially and emotionally. But at the same time, large segments of the populace fault the system for failing to achieve the goal of secure punishment. Interestingly, while crime has become a major *political* issue, it isn't a *partisan* issue. Neither major party has been given an edge consistently, in terms of handling of public policy relating to crime.

Crime rates remain unacceptably high, in most people's view, and intense media coverage of violent crime has undoubtedly added to public worries. But the actual incidence of crime has declined significantly in the 1990s, according to both of the major measures—the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports, and the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Surveys. Public policy sometimes fails—but it sometimes succeeds. Shifting public sentiment has spurred changes, such as more community policing and mandatory sentencing, which seem to have had positive results.

A Review of the Data

In the 1960s, Crime Rates Jumped Sharply From Their Historic Norm

	Robbery	Theft	Assault	Rape	Murder
1933	1.09	6.73	0.56	0.04	0.08
1934	0.86	6.02	0.55	0.04	0.06
1935	0.71	5.20	0.51	0.05	0.07
1936	0.58	4.84	0.52	0.05	0.07
1937	0.62	4.95	0.49	0.06	0.07
1938	0.61	4.76	0.48	0.05	0.07
1939	0.56	4.76	0.50	0.06	0.07
1940	0.54	4.71	0.49	0.06	0.07
1941	0.49	4.71	0.51	0.06	0.07
1942	0.47	4.33	0.54	0.06	0.07
1943	0.45	4.64	0.52	0.07	0.06
1944	0.44	4.89	0.57	0.08	0.06
1945	0.54	5.77	0.63	0.09	0.06
1946	0.59	5.95	0.67	0.09	0.07
1947	0.56	5.61	0.70	0.09	0.06
1948	0.52	5.52	0.71	0.08	0.06
1949	0.55	5.55	0.71	0.07	0.05
1950	0.48	5.59	0.72	0.07	0.05
1951	0.47	5.84	0.68	0.08	0.05
1952	0.51	6.54	0.75	0.07	0.05
1953	0.55	6.82	0.78	0.07	0.05
1954	0.57	6.97	0.78	0.07	0.05
1955	0.48	6.71	0.75	0.08	0.05
1956	0.47	7.38	0.77	0.09	0.05
1957	0.49	7.93	0.78	0.09	0.05
1958	0.55	8.56	0.79	0.09	0.05
1959	0.51	8.51	0.82	0.09	0.05
1960	0.60	9.77	0.85	0.10	0.05
1961	0.58	9.75	0.85	0.09	0.05
1962	0.59	10.33	0.88	0.09	0.05
1963	0.61	11.29	0.91	0.09	0.05
1964	0.68	12.55	1.05	0.11	0.05
1965	0.71	13.81	1.10	0.12	0.05
1966	0.80	14.53	1.19	0.13	0.06
1967	1.02	16.76	1.28	0.14	0.06
1968	1.31	19.45	1.42	0.16	0.06
1969	1.47	21.58	1.52	0.18	0.07
1970	1.71	23.91	1.63	0.19	0.08
1971	1.87	24.94	1.77	0.20	0.08
1972	1.80	24.32	1.87	0.22	0.09
1973	1.78	24.32	1.94	0.24	0.09

FBI, Uniform Crime Reports. Numbers of crimes per 1,000 population.

Note: "Robbery" includes the illegal taking of property through violence or intimidation; "theft" includes burglary, larceny, and auto theft; and "assault" includes both simple and aggravated, but not sexual, assault. The FBI reported these crime-incidence data using as the base population figures for reporting areas only. That is, if a municipality did not report its crime-incidence data to the FBI, its population was not included in the base. The data shown here represent an adjustment made by Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner in *Violence and Crime in Cross-National Pespective*, 1984. Archer and Gartner use as the base the entire US population.

Source: Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner, *Violence and Crime in Cross-National Perspective, 1990-1974 Crime File*. Dane Archer and Rosemary Gartner, producers, 1984. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research distributors, 1994. Data for the United States were compiled from the FBI Uniform Crime Reports.